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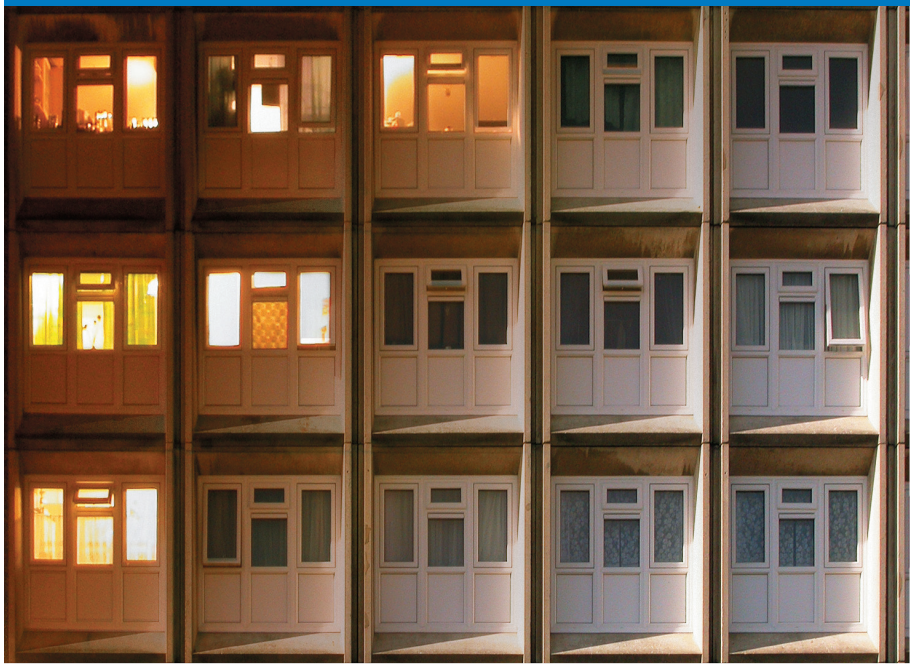
Roger Smalley



Poles Apart & other chamber works

Douglas Finch *piano*
Continuum Ensemble
Philip Headlam *conductor*

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photo: Dominic Dibbs

Variations on a Theme of Chopin

1	Theme		0'25
2	Variation 1		0'30
3	Variation 2		0'26
4	Variation 3		0'27
5	Variation 4		0'20
6	Variation 5		0'42
7	Variation 6		0'34
8	Variation 7		0'21
9	Variation 8		0'15
10	Variation 9		0'26
11	Variation 10		1'26
12	Variation 11		2'00
13	Variation 12		2'30

Piano Trio

14	Part I:	Prelude	2'40
15		Scherzo	3'16
16	Part II:	Passacaglia	1'58
17		Variations	6'04

Poles Apart *

18	Fast and furious	4'11
19	Intermezzo	3'28
20	Chaconne with Chorale	7'43

21	**Frederic Chopin** Mazurka in C# minor, Op.50 No.3	4'45
22	**Trio for clarinet, viola and piano**	10'28
23	**Johannes Brahms** Intermezzo in E minor, Op.116 No.5	2'12

Crepuscule: 15 Variations on a Theme of Brahms, for piano quartet

24	i	Elusive –	1'44
25		Intangible –	1'15
26		Ephemeral –	1'37
27		Transient –	1'54
28		Volatile	1'18
29	ii	Ethereal –	2'05
30		Subliminal –	1'26
31		Evanescent –	1'05
32		Fugitive –	1'37
33		Momentary	1'27
34	iii	Incorporeal –	1'09
35		Tenuous –	1'14
36		Immaterial –	0'53
37		Insubstantial –	1'05
38		Capricious	1'16

Total timing 78'12

The Continuum Ensemble:

Douglas Finch	*piano*
Lisa Nelsen	*flute*
Guy Cowley	*clarinet/bass clarinet*
Marcus Barcham-Stevens	*violin*
David Aspin	*viola*
Joseph Spooner	*cello*
Philip Headlam	*conductor**

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Roger Smalley's Post-1988 Chamber Music in Context

by Christopher Mark

More often than not, significant developments in Smalley's compositional approach have been signalled in chamber music, which has played an important role throughout his career – unsurprisingly, perhaps, given his highly successful parallel career as a concert pianist. Thus the works with which he established himself as a vital compositional presence – *Missa Brevis* (1966, rev. 1967), *Missa Parodia I* and *Missa Parodia II* (both 1967), all based on music by the Tudor composer William Blitheman – were written for 16 solo voices, solo piano, and piano plus eight instruments respectively. And the works for which Smalley is perhaps still best remembered in the UK were written for a four-man ensemble, Intermodulation, that Smalley co-founded with Tim Souster in the late sixties. Peter Maxwell Davies heavily influenced the Blitheman-based works; the Intermodulation pieces – such as *Zeitebenen* (1973), which involves electronic modification of conventionally produced sounds as well as electronically-generated sounds on tape – were composed under the spell of Stockhausen, with whom Smalley studied in 1965-6. It was in another chamber work – *Accord,* for two pianos, conceived during his 1974 residency at The University of Western Australia – that he finally broke free of his former teacher, establishing a number of techniques that formed the basis of his music of the next decade. These included a *rapprochement* with the notion of tonal centrality, which led in turn to the most significant development in Smalley's music of the past 15 years – the derivation of movements, or, in some cases, entire works, from the music of Romantic masters, including Chopin – who provides the material for the Variations on a Theme of Chopin, the Piano Trio, and the last movement of *Poles Apart* – and Brahms, whose music forms the basis of *Crepuscule*.

If one listens to the latter works without knowing Smalley's earlier corpus, one might come to the conclusion that he was intent on a kind of musical time-travelling – of journeying back to the early twentieth century and reinventing in his own terms the response of figures such as Schoenberg and Bartók to the great 19th-century chamber-music tradition, bracketing out in the process most of what occurred in the subsequent years of the twentieth century, his own earlier music included. But the Intermodulation experience was in fact crucial for Smalley's more recent achievements. Chamber music is not simply a matter of the number of instruments employed: it is about the way in which the performers must relate. The typical Intermodulation work involved a certain amount of improvisation; in some cases, such as Smalley's *Study for Pulses*, there is only a set of written instructions of the most basic kind, central to which is the need for the performers constantly to respond to each other's ideas. None of the works on this disc demands such interaction, but they often embody the spirit of it: despite the precision with which this music is composed and notated, it compels the performer to seize and interpret it.

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As I have already implied, the musical language of the works recorded here would have been impossible without Smalley's Stockhausen-inspired adventures of the late sixties and early seventies. Despite appearances, Smalley remains a constructivist, pitch and duration being manipulated by rigorously worked-out schemes. The attitude remains modernist at heart rather than neo-romantic or postmodern. There is a sense of coherence being sought, but it remains fugitive, the (ultimately) centripetal experience of 19th-century tonality being replaced by something more fragmentary, at times even centrifugal. This fragmentation is perhaps most apparent in the first two movements of *Poles Apart*; even the serene poise at the end of its final movement is 'disturbed' by a soft cello pizzicato that doesn't fit with the rest of the harmony. In fact, none of Smalley's Chopin-based works end conclusively, while the final E of *Crepuscule* is less than fully stable, as the title of the work would seem to demand. Far from being negative, however, such strategies create a depth and expressiveness rare in contemporary music. And the resonance with a genuinely communal language affords the listener him- or herself an intimacy of experience that many may have feared lost to the distancing esotericism of post-World War II avant garde.

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Poles Apart

Notes by Roger Smalley

The theme of my Variations on a Theme of Chopin for solo piano is the whole of Chopin's Mazurka in B♭ minor, Op.24 No.4, although only the first six bars are quoted at the beginning – just enough to remind the listener of the original piece. These bars form a series of progressively diminishing intervals from an octave down to a minor second. In each of the twelve short variations, elements of the theme are transformed through the prism of one of these intervals, e.g. the first variation is exclusively in octaves, the second uses major and minor seconds in the right hand rhythmically displaced against the original left hand part, and the third variation concentrates on major and minor sixths.

The original Mazurka changes markedly in character towards the end by introducing new material and slowly winding down in a long coda. My variations attempt to mirror this structure so that the first eight variations are extremely dynamic but in the ninth variation a brake is put on the music; three much slower variations follow. The twelfth and final variation (an improvisatory melody over a shifting drone bass) is the most extended, drawing ever closer to the original until the last two bars turn out to be the same as Chopin's.

The Piano Trio is in two parts, each of which consists of two linked movements – a short slow section which acts as an introduction to a longer fast movement. The material in this trio is based on an extremely chromatic eight-bar harmonic progression that occurs towards the end of Chopin's Mazurka in A♭ major, Op.59 No.2. The opening Prelude

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presents the whole of this progression stretched out over the entire length of the movement and embellished with sighing chromatic figures. This leads, via a prolonged dominant seventh chord, directly into the Scherzo, whose form could be represented as A B A C D A, with three trios (B, C and D.) Part II opens with a slow Passacaglia during which Chopin's harmonic progression is unfolded (from the bass up) as four superimposed contrapuntal lines, rather than a series of harmonies as in the Prelude. The thirteen variations which follow are generally based on one of these lines or feature a common interval extracted from all four lines. The first six variations are fast and vigorous leading to a climax in variation 7 – loud repeated chords in the bass of the piano, out of which emerge ethereal harmonics on the violin and cello. The final six variations are slow and in the form of a chaconne. The music draws ever closer to the Chopin original, but the work ends ambivalently.

Poles Apart (scored for flute, bass clarinet, violin, viola and cello) opens with a vigorous movement in the same energetic tempo throughout, even though the number of beats per bar constantly changes through the twelve sections. The second movement is subdued in tone. Each instrument has its own melody; all are combined and recombined in 24 different sections that become progressively shorter until the music simply vanishes, like a fading dream. The third movement consists of 24 variations on an eight-bar harmonic sequence from Chopin's Mazurka in C# minor, Op.50 No.3. Preceded by a chorale, the sequence (used as a chaconne) gradually becomes compressed whilst increases in tempo build momentum. The climax is reached in variation 23, after which the music fades away rapidly and ends with the chorale in the highest register.

Having decided to compose a Trio for viola, clarinet and piano, my thoughts turned to the late Sonatas of Brahms, which he designated as being performable on either clarinet or viola, and in particular to the opening of the first variation of the finale of the Sonata in E♭, Op.120 No.2. The essence of this unusually sparse – even Webern-like – passage is presented in the viola solo which opens the *Trio*. Although everything that follows is derived from this, the Brahms fragment is never heard in its original form.

Formally, the *Trio* is in an expanded one-movement sonata design, with an energetic first subject (clarinet and viola, later joined by the piano) and a lyrical second subject (clarinet solo.) The recapitulation of the first subject overlaps with a march which forms the second half of the development section. When the second subject is reached again (low piano) it becomes the theme of a set of variations, which steadily increase in volume and speed. At its climax, the variation theme (on the piano) is combined with the first subject (clarinet and viola). After this, the music suddenly collapses and fragments.

In *Crepuscule*, for violin, viola, cello and piano (15 Variations on a Theme of Brahms), all of the musical material is derived from Brahms' Intermezzo in E minor, Op.116 No.5.

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When I began sketching *Crepuscule* in early June 1998, I planned about a dozen variations on different aspects of Brahms' short piano piece, but had not yet evolved an overall structure. At that time, I visited an exhibition of new work by one my favourite painters, Lesley Duxbury. One work, entitled 'Crepuscule' (meaning twilight or dusk), consisted of 15 postcard-sized paintings, each mounted in a glass-fronted box and hung in 3 horizontal rows of 5 boxes with highly suggestive one-word titles. Upon seeing this, I realized that I could transfer its structure to my quartet, which became 15 variations divided into 3 movements each containing 5 variations. I also retained the evocative titles that acted as a stimulus in terms of tempo, mood and texture.

One of my intentions in *Crepuscule* was to vary the texture by featuring solos, duos and trios in contrast to the piano quartets of the Romantic period (Brahms, Fauré, etc.) where all four instruments play most of the time. Thus, variation 1 is for violin alone and variation 2 is a piano solo. The viola and cello do not enter until variation 3, which is mainly for string trio. Variation 4 is another trio (for viola, cello and piano) and the whole quartet does not play together until the fifth and final variation of the first movement. The second movement opens with a slow cello solo accompanied by the piano, and the changes continue to be rung.

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ROGER SMALLEY

Roger Smalley was born near Manchester in 1943. At the Royal College of Music, London, he studied piano with Anthony Hopkins, and composition with Peter Racine Fricker and John White. He took private composition lessons with Alexander Goehr and further studies with Karlheinz Stockhausen at the Cologne Course for New Music. As a pianist, he was a prize-winner at the International Competition for Interpreters of Contemporary Music (Utrecht, 1966) and received the Harriet Cohen International Music Award for contemporary music performance (1968).

With Tim Souster, he formed the ensemble Intermodulation, specializing in works involving improvisation and live electronics, which performed throughout England and Europe from 1969 until 1976. In 1968 he was appointed first Artist-in-Residence at King's College, Cambridge where he subsequently held a three year research Fellowship. In 1974, he spent three months as Composer-in-Residence at The University of Western Australia, Perth; he returned two years later as a Research Fellow and is now Professorial Fellow in Music.

He continues to perform and record as a soloist – his discs including John White's Piano Sonatas for NMC – and as a member of the Australian Piano Quartet. Since 1989 he has been Artistic Director and conductor of the West Australia Symphony Orchestra's New Music Ensemble, and was Composer in Residence with the orchestra from 1995-6. In 1991 he was the recipient of a Creative Development Award from the Western Australian Department for the Arts and was elected a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. In 1994, he was awarded the Australia Council's prestigious Don Banks Fellowship for his distinguished contribution to Australian music.

Roger Smalley's compositions have been performed and broadcast world-wide with commissions from the BBC, Symphony Australia, West German Radio, Festival of Perth, the Adelaide Festival, London Sinfonietta, Fires of London, Flederman, Nova Ensemble, Australian String Quartet, Seymour Group and the Australia Ensemble. His work *Pulses* was recorded for NMC by the BBC Symphony Orchestra (NMC D017M); the Piano Concerto, a BBC commission for European Music Year (1985) was the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's entry in the annual Rostrum of Composers (UNESCO) in 1987, where it was voted the 'recommended' work.

THE CONTINUUM ENSEMBLE

The Continuum Ensemble, founded in 1994 by co-artistic directors Douglas Finch and Philip Headlam, performs music of the 20th and 21st centuries for concert and stage. It has a core membership of 15 players but adapts to perform solo, chamber and ensemble music; it has given 35 world and 30 UK premieres, and received consistent praise from press and audiences. Highlights have included: staged productions of Zimmermann's *White Rose* and Henze's *El Cimarron*; an evening of music theatre pieces by George Aperghis; festivals of improvisation (*Tradition and Innovation*) and new music from Paris (*Recitations and Conversations*); and concerts for the New Iberia Festival, Quebec In Motion Festival, BMIC's *Cutting Edge* series and the Spitalfields Festival. The ensemble's concerts and recordings have also been broadcast on BBC Radio 3. In 2002 The Continuum Ensemble released a CD of music by composer Errollyn Wallen, on the Avie label, to outstanding reviews.

DOUGLAS FINCH

PIANO

Pianist and composer Douglas Finch studied in Canada, where he was born, and at The Juilliard School, New York; his teachers included William Aide and Beveridge Webster. After winning a Silver Medal at the Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels (1978), he performed recitals and as soloist with orchestra throughout Europe, the US and Canada before settling in London; he has been Head of Keyboard Faculty at Trinity College of Music, London since 1999. In the UK he has performed at the Dartington Summer Festival, London's South Bank Centre, St. David's Hall in Cardiff, and at Spitalfields Festival; he has also give concerts in Spain, Portugal, Ireland and Japan. He has become particularly well known for his improvisations on themes suggested by his audiences, which he often includes in his recitals and broadcasts on BBC Radio 3 and the CBC. His compositions include works for piano, chamber ensemble and orchestra as well as a music theatre piece, *Transplant* (2001) and the score for the film *Painted Angels* (1999). His recording of Charles Ives' *Concord Sonata* and works of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor is released in Autumn 2004.

PHILIP HEADLAM

CONDUCTOR

Philip Headlam conducts in the UK, Europe and Canada in opera, concert and contemporary music; he has worked with English Touring Opera, English National Opera, the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, Albert Hall/Gubbay Opera, Batignano Opera Festival (Italy), Vlaamse Opera Studio (Ghent) and the Opera de la Monnaie (Brussels). Other ensembles he has conducted include the Manitoba Chamber Orchestra, Ensemble Contemporain de Montreal, and the Contemporary Opera Programme at the Banff Centre, Canada; he has also broadcast on BBC Radio 3, Belgian Radio and the CBC.

As co-artistic director of The Continuum Ensemble, he has programmed and conducted over 45 concerts, as well as scoring works by Ravel, Brahms, Berg and Dallapiccola for chamber orchestra; his recording of works by Errollyn Wallen received outstanding reviews. He will conduct the world premiere of Judith Weir's opera *Armida* for television broadcast, on Channel 4, in 2004.

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This disc was recorded at the Church of St Jude-on-the-Hill, Hampstead, London, on 6-7 July and 17-18 September 2003.

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